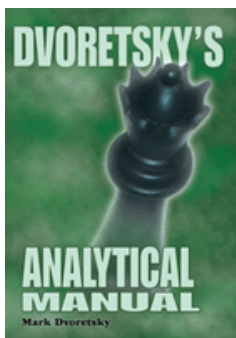




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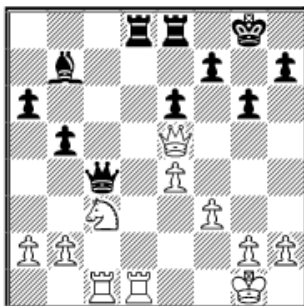


A Lesson in Positional Play

There are different ways to expand your mastery of positional play. One is to study well-played and carefully annotated games between strong players. I found the following game fragment in an outstanding collection of exercises, prepared by Andrei Volokitin and his trainer, Vladimir Grabinski, entitled, *Perfect Your Chess* (the Russian edition came out under the title: “Self-Teacher For Wonderboys”).

Of course, the authors’ attention was concentrated on the starting position, offered to their readers for independent solving. Yet, analysis demonstrated that the game’s further course offered a number of instructive episodes, related to various aspects of positional mastery: knowing how to play with pawns and pieces, prophylaxis, the choice between steady improvement of the position and forcing play, etc. Diagrams that have a question mark placed under them, after the indication of whose turn it is to move, may be used as exercises.

Ponomariov - Svidler
Sofia 2006



1.?

White has nothing, or next to nothing, here. 23.Nd5?? fails to 23... ed!+-. (White would also have to think about 23...b4.) If 23.a3, then 23...b4 24. ab Qxb4 =. On 23.b3, there follows 23...Qb4 24.Qf6 Rxd1+ 25.Rxd1 Qe7 =. In the variation 23.Qf6 Qc5+ 24.Kf1!? Rxd1+ 25.Rxd1 Qe7, White could try 26.e5!?, when Black would not need study the position that arises after 26...Qxf6 27.ef b4 (with 28...Bd5 to follow), since he could simply continue 26...b4 unclear.

Ruslan Ponomariov finds an outstanding setup for his pieces.

23.Kg1-f2!!

White prepares to retreat his knight to e2, and then to invade at c7 with his rook. The king can be tucked away at g3, if necessary, where it will be safer than it was on the first rank. Another factor is that Black’s situation worsens with each trade, since the king’s proximity to the center grows more important in the endgame.

23...Qc4-c6

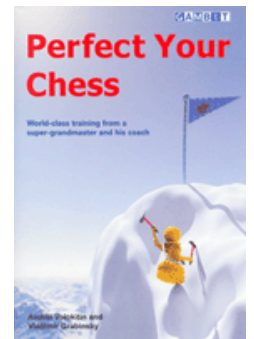
After 23...b4?! 24.Ne2, exchanging queens by 24...Qb5 25.Qxb5 ab 26. Rxd8 (26.Rd4!?) 26...Rxd8 27.Ke3 leads to a difficult endgame for Black. And chasing the pawn by 24...Qxa2? would be refuted by 25. Rxd8 Rxd8 26.Rc7 Ba8 27.Nf4! (with the threat of 28.Nh5!) 27...Rf8 28. Re7+–, with the unstoppable threat of 29.Nxe6. If he wants to, White could even play 28.Kg3!?, intending to continue marching his king by Kg4-g5-g6 into the opposing camp, since even winning the queen after Kg5 by f7-f6+ would not keep Black from getting mated.

If 23...Qb4!?, then 24.Rxd8 Rxd8 25.Ne2, intending 26.Rc7.

24.Nc3-e2

This was consistent. However, 24.Na4!? deserved serious consideration. Similar problems continually arise during play – sometimes, when we are seeking to realize the advantage we have achieved. Should we follow our intended plan, or seize upon a sudden tactical opportunity? Will this path increase our advantage, or make it disappear? Most often, only attentive calculation will allow us to establish the truth – but should we be spending time and energy on it? Should we follow our calculations, or

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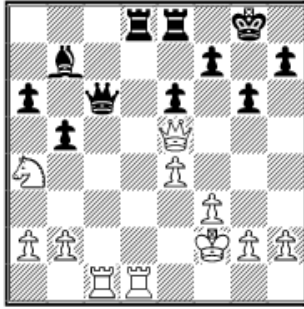


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make an intuitive decision? I have no recipe for this – such problems must be resolved afresh each time.



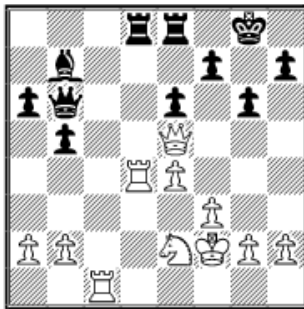
It's hard to give Black good advice in the position with two rooks versus queen that arises after 24...Rxd1 25.Rxc6 Bxc6 26.Nc5. His bishop has no future, his rooks are separated, and his opponent is dominant on both wings. The a6-pawn is under fire, while he must consider the queen invading at c7, the solidifying move b2-b4, and also the advance of the h- and g-pawns. On 26...Red8, White wins by 27.Nxe6 fe 28.Qxe6+ Kg7 29.Qxc6. 26...a5 27.Qc7 would be bad for Black; and after 26...Rc1, White can choose among 27.b4, 27.h4 or 27.Nxa6 Rd8 (27...Ra8 28.Nb4 Be8 29.g4) 28.Ke3. Nor does Black's position get any easier after 26...Rd2+ 27.Kg3.

Black would probably need to try 24...Rd2+!? 25.Kg3 (25.Rxd2 Qxc1 26.Qc3 Qxc3 27.Nxc3 Rc8 is weaker) 25...Rc2. He's not overly afraid of 26.Rd6?! Rxg2+! 27.Kxg2 Qxc1 unclear, or 26.Rxc2?! Qxc2 27.Rd7 Bc8 28.Nc5 Bxd7 28.Nxd7 Rd8 =. But White plays 26.Nc5! Rxc1 27.Rxc1, with 28.Rd1 or 28.b4 to follow, and keeps a significant advantage.

In the game, Ruslan Ponomarev's achievements were more modest.

24...Qc6-b6+ 25.Rd1-d4!

Cool play: having his rook pinned doesn't bother Ponomarev. A simpler defense is 25.Kg3 Rxd1 26.Rxd1 Rd8.



1...?

25...Rd8-d7?

The natural move, but not the best. Black increases the pressure on the rook, but he will be unable to exploit the pin.

On 25...b4, White forces favorable exchanges by 26.Qc5+/-.

And Grabinski and Volokitin's recommendation of 25...a5 26.Qc5 Qa6 would be met by 27.Rxd8 Rxd8 28.Qe7 Qb6+ (28...Rc8 29.Rxc8+ Bxc8 30.Qc7+/-) 29.Ke1 Rf8 30.Rc7 Ba6 31.Qc5+/-.

For both sides, control of the c-file is more important than control of the neighboring d-file, which is why Black should have played **25...Rc8!** For example, 26.Qd6 Rc6! (in the variation 26...Qxd6 27.Rxd6 Rxc1 28.Nxc1 Rc8 29.Nd3, Black risks losing his unfortunately placed bishop) 27.Rxc6 Bxc6 28.e5 Rc8+/-.

26.b2-b4!

Ponomarev fixes the opposing queenside pawns on the same color squares as Black's bishop, while also increasing his control over the c5-square.

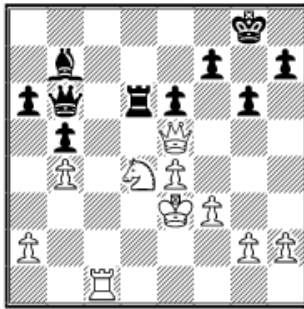
26...Re8-d8 27.Kf2-e3!

The centralized king is perfectly safe.

27...Rd7xd4

27...a5 28.a3 changes little.

28.Ne2xd4 Rd8-d6



1.?

White would like to post either the rook or the queen at c5; there are other attractive continuations as well. But if we use prophylactic thinking – that is, if we ask ourselves, What is my opponent planning? – then we arrive at the move played by Ponomariov.

29.Qe5-f6!

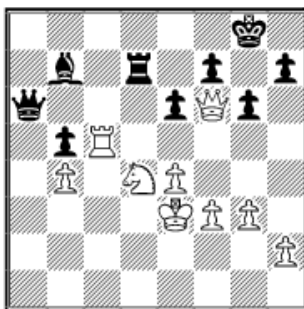
It's important to keep the black queen out of d8.

29...Rd6-d7 30.Rc1-c5 Qb6-d6 31.g2-g3 a6-a5

Black's pieces are penned inside their own camp. Peter Svidler tries to show some activity: he opens the a-file, hoping to generate counterplay. But his decision is questionable, as it also weakens the pawn at b5. Perhaps he should have stuck with the waiting game; for instance, 31...h5! (and possibly h5-h4 later on).

32.a2-a3 a5xb4 33.a3xb4 Qd6-a6

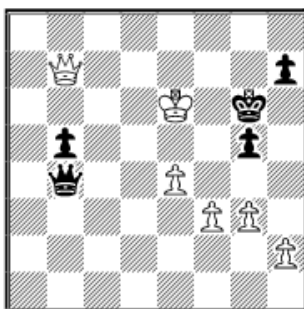
A move that is logically understandable, although certainly not necessary (33...h5!?).



1.?

34.Nd4-e2

Once again, we must deal with the same kind of problem we faced on the twenty-fourth move. White had an interesting try at simplification available: **34.Rc7!?**, whose consequences are not at all simple to calculate. The game might continue 34...Qa3+ 35.Kf4 Rxc7 36.Qd8+ Kg7 37.Qxc7 (37.Nxe6+ fe 38.Qxc7+ Kh6 39.Qxb7 Qxb4 results in an even queen endgame) 37...g5+! (without this counterstroke, Black's position would have to be considered hopeless) 38.Ke5 (38.Kxg5? Qe3+ 39.Kg4 Qxd4 40.Qxb7 Qxb4; 38.Kg4 Kg6! 39.Qxb7 h5+ 40.Kh3 Qa1 41.Qxb5 Qxd4 =) 38...Qxb4 39.Nxe6+ (39.h4 Qc4 =) 39...Kg6 40.Qxb7 fe 41.Kxe6.



1...?

Evidently, Black could justifiably expect to draw the game after 41...Qc4+ (but not 41...Qb3+?! 42.Qd5 Qxf3? 43.Qf5+) 42.Qd5 Qc8+ 43.Qd7 (43.Ke5 Qc3+ 44.Kd6 Qxf3) 43...Qc4+ (43...Qxd7+? would lose to 44.Kxd7 b4 45.e5 b3 46.e6 b2 47.e7 b1Q 48.e8Q+ Kg7 49.Qe7+ Kg6 50.Qe4+) 44.Kd6 Qd3+ 45.Ke7 Qxf3.

Ponomariov is in no hurry to force matters, preferring to maintain the tension – and it appears he was right.

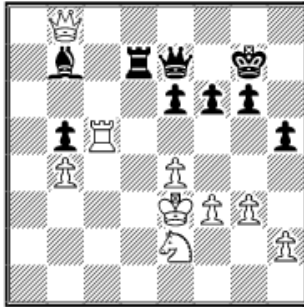
34...Qa6-d6 35.Qf6-c3

The immediate 35.Qd4 Qe7 36.Qe5 would be more accurate.

35...h7-h5 36.Qc3-d4 Qd6-e7 37.Qd4-e5 f7-f6

37...Kh7 would have been safer.

38.Qe5-b8+ Kg8-g7



1.?

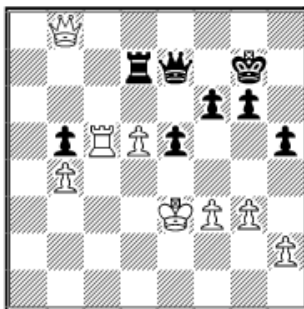
Ponomariov has outplayed his opponent, and now the natural move **39.e5!** would have secured his positional advantage (39...Bd5 40.Nc3). And it's possible that **39.f4!** would have been still more exact.

The indecisive continuation he actually chose should have let White's advantage disappear.

39.Ne2-c3? e6-e5! 40.Nc3-d5 Bb7xd5?

Of course Black would like to get rid of the powerful knight, but he did not need to rush this exchange. 40...Qe6! or 40...Qf7! would have equalized completely.

41.e4xd5



1...?

41...f7-f5?

A second successive error puts Black in difficult straits.

Mihail Marin's recommendation, 41...Ra7?, is also dubious: White replies 42.d6 Ra3+ 43.Ke4! f5+ (only move) 44.Kd5+/-.

Black needed to drive the queen away from b8 first, by 41...Rb7!; only after 42.Qc8 (or 42.Qa8) should he play 42...Ra7 – this way, the d-pawn would be unable to advance immediately. 43.Rxb5 would be met by 43...Rc7!, followed by f7-f5.

42.Qb8xb5 f5-f4+ 43.Ke3-f2 e5-e4

Black is not to be envied after 43...fg+ 44.hg h4 45.Qc4 hg+ 46.Kxg3, either.

44.f3xe4 f4xg3+ 45.h2xg3 Qe7-f6+ 46.Kf2-g2 Qf6-b2+ 47.Kg2-h3

The rest is elementary.

47...Rf7 48.Qd3 Qxb4 49.Qc3+ Qxc3 50.Rxc3 Re7 51.Rc4 Kf6 52.Kh4 Ke5

52...Re8 53.Rc6+ Kf7 54.Re6.

53.Rc6! 1-0

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